

Mediawatch

Meningitis vaccination programme prompts needless scare

Bernard Dixon

On 27 August *The Observer* newspaper in the UK published no less than four articles on allegedly serious dangers associated with the serogroup C meningococcal conjugate vaccine, introduced for routine use in this country about a year ago. First, a page one banner headline (“Meningitis jab deaths ‘cover-up’”) heralded a report that at least 11 young people had died after receiving the new vaccine. The British Department of Health had chosen not to publicise the fatalities ‘for fear of panicking parents’.

An even longer inside-page article added disquieting information about 16,000 adverse reactions, and described their human impact. “He was a young man with everything to look forward to,” said one victim’s mother. “This has affected his whole life.” Underlining the apparent importance of the revelations, an editorial said: “The Department of Health believes that reactions to the new meningitis vaccination could have killed 11 schoolchildren, but has decided on a cover-up.”

But there was also a fourth, shorter piece, this one by *The Observer*’s science editor, Robin McKie. Pointing out that meningitis C “remains one of the most feared killers in this country”, he discussed the different strains of meningococci, the difficulties facing immunisation efforts and the merits of the new jab.

“Since its introduction last year, 13 million samples...have been administered, resulting in a 75% drop in cases of meningitis C throughout the country,” McKie wrote. “By

inference, that translates as the saving of more than 100 lives.”

The following day, *Daily Mail* readers were probably even more perplexed. In one and the same article, they were not only told about the deaths, adverse reactions and ‘horror stories’ from the lobby group Justice Awareness Basic Support (JABS). They also learned that the Department of Health had categorically ruled out any links between the fatalities and the vaccine, which had been extremely successful in preventing the disease.

It was left to the health editor of *The Times*, Nigel Hawkes, to make several crucial points. Firstly, the vaccine could not cause meningitis anyway because it does not contain live virus. Secondly, there were bound to be some reactions among 13 million vaccinees, as well as deaths following — but unrelated to — immunisation.

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Thirdly, the Department of Health had issued a definitive dossier on the 11 fatalities. These included six cot deaths, two deaths related to pre-existing heart conditions and two cases of meningitis B.

Coverage in other newspapers occupied various points along the continuum from robust debunking to continued disquiet. *The Daily Telegraph* relayed the Health Department’s confident insistence that “Meningitis jab is safe”. *The Independent* stayed on the fence with “Government denies links between deaths and meningitis vaccination”. *The Guardian*, under the headline “Vaccine under scrutiny after deaths”, suggested quite wrongly that *The Observer*’s reports had triggered an investigation.

Meanwhile, broadcasters had amplified the original message. Breakfast-time television programmes in particular, by focussing on ‘human interest’ to the detriment of rational analysis, may have added to parental anxieties. As with other immunisation scares over the years, needless alarm will almost certainly have encouraged some parents to decline or postpone immunisation — not only against meningitis C but other infections too.

The frequency with which needless vaccine scares erupt in the media should surely persuade news editors (the gatekeepers who control the news agenda) to assess such claims more cautiously. There have, of course, been real immunisation tragedies in the past. Far commoner, over the past half century, have been allegations that have proved to be without foundation. During the same period, vaccines have rendered smallpox extinct, brought poliomyelitis close to global eradication and controlled many other infections, from diphtheria to hepatitis B.

The media need to be aware that while immunisation hazards of the type alleged by *The Observer* are by no means impossible, modern screening protocols make them inherently unlikely. On this occasion a few simple questions would soon have put the matter in proper perspective. How many random deaths, for example, might be expected among 13 million vaccinees over a year?

The other lesson is that news editors should trust their specialist journalists more. “Part of a science correspondent’s job is to put the kibosh on someone else’s story,” says Robin McKie. Fine. But it would be better if this meant baseless scares being rejected at source, rather than being published with corrective footnotes beneath.

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